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AUTHOR House, Elizabeth B.; House, William J.
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ABSTRACT

The essays composed by 84 remedial and 77 nonremedial college freshmen were analyzed for some features proposed by Mina Shaughnessy as being characteristic of basic writers. The students were enrolled in either a beginning remedial class (098), a class at the next level of remediation (099), or a regular English class (101). The essays were analyzed for total number of words written; for sentence faults; for spelling errors by number and type, as defined by Shaughnessy; for features she described as "s" inflection errors; and for traditional indices of syntactic maturity: T unit length, clause length, and clauses per T unit. To equate differences in paper length, errors were calculated per 50 words written. The results showed that the only characteristic that clearly distinguished between the three groups was mean number of words per essay. No significant difference was found in the frequency with which any of the errors examined appeared in remedial 099 and in nonremedial 101 essays. Between the 098 students and the other groups, variations did occur in number and kind of misspellings and in several errors that appeared to be dialect related. No significant differences were found between the three groups in T unit length, clause length, or clauses per T. However, a significant difference in T length was found in papers written by students at the very top and bottom of the sample (those scoring over 500 or below 300 on the verbal SAT). (FL)

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SOME SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES
BETWEEN COMPOSITIONS WRITTEN BY REMEDIAL AND
NON-REMEDIAL COLLEGE FRESHMEN

Elizabeth B. House and William J. House

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Elizabeth B. House

Assistant Professor of Special Studies

Augusta College

Augusta, Georgia

William J. House

Associate Professor of Psychology

University of South Carolina - Aiken

Aiken, South Carolina

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SOME SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES
BETWEEN COMPOSITIONS WRITTEN BY REMEDIAL AND
NON-REMEDIAL COLLEGE FRESHMEN

College students are placed in remedial or basic English courses because their writing is in some ways different from that done by people admitted to regular freshman classes. Logically, then, one of basic writing teachers' first tasks should be to identify writing characteristics which distinguish their students from traditional freshmen. With this knowledge, instructors can choose texts and curricula most appropriate for helping students modify or eliminate prose features which mark them as writers in need of remedial training.

At present, however, basic writing teachers have little empirical data about writing differences between remedial and non-remedial students or about ability variations within groups labeled remedial. Most contributions to the literature of basic writing have been subjective analyses of students' problems; even data for the best existing description of developmental writers, Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations (1977), are not drawn from controlled experimentation. Two experimentally based studies of remedial students, Kirschner and Poteet's (1973) comparison of errors committed by black, white, and Hispanic students, and Higgins' (1973) contrast of basic writers' needs and text-workbook contents provide beginning insights into remedial students' writing. Neither of these studies, however, examines differences between compositions written by basic writers and those composed by students in traditional freshman classes.

The purpose of the present study is to begin an experimental comparison of writing done by remedial and non-remedial freshmen. In this experiment, essays composed by two levels of remedial students and by non-remedial fresh-

men were analyzed for some features Shaughnessy proposed as being characteristic of basic writers. In addition, levels of syntactic maturity (as measured by T unit length, clause length, and number of clauses per T) were calculated for each writer in the sample.

METHOD

Procedure

In the fall of 1978, five weeks into a ten week quarter, four remedial and four non-remedial freshman English classes at Augusta College were given fifty minutes to write essays on the topic, "If you could invite anyone in the world to lunch tomorrow, whom would you invite and what would you talk about?" This assignment was given by the instructor of the class and was treated as if it were a normal classroom assignment. All classes met in the morning and were taught by experienced teachers. None of the classes had been given sentence combining exercises, but the remedial classes had worked on exercises designed to eliminate subject-verb disagreements, sentence faults, and other errors.

Subjects

The remedial writers (84) were enrolled in two English 098 classes (43 students), the beginning remedial course, and two English 099 courses (41 students), the next level of remediation; the non-remedial subjects (77 students) were in four English 101 classes. Thus, a total of 161 students participated in the experiment.

Several factors determined whether freshmen used in this study were enrolled in remedial English classes 098 and 099, or in traditional 101 courses. Students whose SAT verbal score exceeded 400 entered English 101. Those who scored below 400 took a state Basic Skills Exam; depending on their performance on this test, students were placed in English 101, 099,

or 098. Additionally, if several in-class writing samples indicated that a student had not been placed correctly, he or she could be moved to another level by an instructor. Too, some students were admitted to English 099 or 101 classes because they had successfully completed prerequisite remedial courses.

Clearly, variables besides the verbal SAT score were involved in defining the two remedial groups and the non-remedial 101 classes, but it is instructive to note this mean for each group: The 098 remedial class has a SATV mean of 306 (SD=6329); the 099 group's SATV mean was 343 (SD=70.44); and the four 101 classes had a mean SATV of 447 (SD=87.22).

Measurements

The essays from four remedial and four non-remedial classes were analyzed for total number of words written; for sentence faults: comma splices, fragments, fused sentences; for spelling errors by number and type basically as defined by Shaughnessy (1978); for features which Shaughnessy (1978) described as s inflection errors: lack of s to indicate possession, lack of s inflection for present tense verbs having third person singular subjects, inappropriate addition of s inflection for present tense verbs having non-third person singular subjects, and lack of s to mark plural nouns; and for traditional indices of syntactic maturity: T length, clause length, and clauses per T. In order to equate different length papers, errors were calculated per fifty words written.

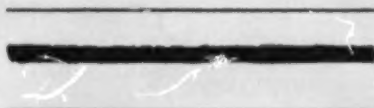
Analysis of Data

Multivariate analyses of variance were computed incorporating subject variables (race and sex) as factors along with the three course levels: remedial 098, remedial 099, and non-remedial 101 freshman English. Subject variables were included in the analysis in order to insure that any varia-

tions among the classes could not be accounted for by interactions of such factors with the class differences. The thrust of the present research, however, was toward determining differences and similarities between remedial and non-remedial freshman writers in the most general sense. Unequal cell sizes were compensated for by the method of least squares.

RESULTS

The only characteristic which clearly distinguished between all three groups, 098, 099, and 101, was mean number of words per essay. No significant difference was found in the frequency with which any of the errors examined appeared in remedial 099 essays and in non-remedial 101 papers. The 099 papers simply could not be distinguished from the 101 ones simply by looking at the number or kinds of errors in each group's writing. Between the 098 students and other writers, variations did occur in number and kind of misspellings and in several errors which would seem to be dialect related. No significant differences were found between the three groups in T unit length, clause length, or clauses per T. However, a significant difference in T length was found in papers written by students at the very top and bottom of the sample, those scoring over 500 or below 300 on the verbal SAT.



Fluency

As can be seen in Table 1, a highly significant effect was found for mean number of words per essay. Although there was evidence of a modest interaction of course by subject variable, by far the most potent source of variance was the course effect. Tukey paired comparison tests revealed that all three groups significantly differed from each other, but the

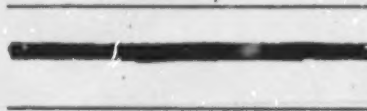
greatest variation occurred between the two remedial classes and the traditional freshmen. A difference of 28.83 words existed between mean words written by 098 and 099 students, while 77.06 words separated the average length of papers composed by 099 and 101 students. The 105.98 word difference in average words written by the 098 and 101 subjects suggests that fluency is a characteristic which markedly separates remedial from non-remedial writers. This conclusion about the importance of fluency supports that reached by Gebbard (1978) in her study of traditional freshman writers whose mean SATV score, 520, was much higher than that of the present study's subjects. In her examination of papers which had been judged "good" or "poor", Gebbard found that good essays were substantially longer than poor ones; she concluded that fluency is one characteristic which clearly separates good and poor writers.



Table 2 shows the means for total spelling errors, the sixteen types of misspellings and one combination: homophones and word confusions. As can be seen, total spelling errors and misspellings of suffixes produced significant main effects for course. Tukey analysis revealed the major source of variance to be the 098 courses; the 099 and 101 groups did not differ significantly. There were, further, no subject variable interactions with the course effect. Misspellings of homophones and word confusions seem to suggest the beginning basic writer's lack of experience with written language, but further research is needed to explain why 098 writers made significantly more of these and not other errors and why misspellings of suffixes occurred so often.



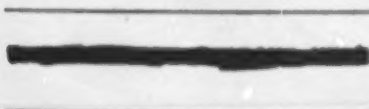
Table 3 presents the mean number of comma splices, fused sentences, and sentence fragments per fifty words produced by the two remedial groups and the traditional 101 classes. As can be seen, no group main effects were observed; neither were there any significant interactions of group by subject variables.



Mean past tense inflection errors per group are presented in Table 4. As can be seen, only omission of past tense inflections produced significant variance. Included in the same table are the mean non-standard s inflections per fifty words. Types one and two, inappropriate addition or deletion of s present tense verb inflection, and type three, lack of s to mark plural nouns, were the three significant effects. Tukey analyses revealed that, in the type one s error, the prime source of variance was the 098 class; the 099 and 101 means did not significantly differ. Similarly the 098 group was responsible for the main effect for the type two and type three s errors. The race interactions which are present for both s error one and two clearly indicate a dialect difference among the subjects. No such interaction occurs in the type three s error, but this phenomenon occurs because no type three s errors were committed in the 099 and 101 groups. Consequently, this lack of interaction should not be viewed as a departure from the pattern set by type one and two.

Besides differences in fluency and number and kind of misspellings committed by 098 students and other subjects, the only characteristics which were found to distinguish between any of the groups were these non-standard, dialect-related s inflections and the past tense marker. These

data suggest how much some placement procedures penalize students who use non-standard dialect, for apparently whatever students' levels of syntactic maturity, mastery of terminal sentence punctuation, or, perhaps, other language skills, the use of non-standard inflections places them in English 098.



As Table 1 shows, no significant differences between groups were found for T length, clause length, or clauses per T. Several researchers have demonstrated that children's syntactic maturity as measured by T units, clause length, and number of clauses per T increases throughout grade school, junior high, and senior high school. Hunt (1965) examined compositions of 4th, 8th, and 12th graders and found an increase of T unit and clause length and clauses per T at each grade level. [Hunt T length: grade 4 (8.6), grade 8 (11.5), grade 12 (14.4).] Similarly, O'Donnell (1967) found an increase of T unit length through every grade when he looked at compositions of 3rd, 5th, and 7th graders. Hunt (1970) also found marked differences in syntactic maturity between average adults (firemen) in non-academic settings and superior adults, ones who had had work published in Harper's or Atlantic.

Although traditional measures of syntactic maturity did not distinguish between the three groups of writers, a difference in T length was found between the very top and bottom of the sample, writers with SATV scores over 500 and below 300. Differences in clause length approached (.07) but did not reach significance. Table 5 lists data for this analysis.

Although variations in topic and mode make precise comparison between free writing experiments difficult, it is instructive to note that the words

per T (15.4) for this study's writers scoring below 300 on the SATV is above that Hunt (1965) reported for 12th graders (14.4) and quite in line with the figures Morenberg, Daiker, and Kerek (1978) report for pretreatment traditional college freshmen (15.00, 15.31). Writers whose SATV scores exceed 500 wrote T units (18.6) which were closer in length to those of Hunt's (1965) superior adults (20.30) than to average freshmen's. Thus, it would seem that the syntactic maturity of remedial writers scoring below 300 on the SATV is not so much inferior to that of average students, but rather that syntactic levels of those scoring over 500 are superior.

These data begin to answer a fundamental question about remedial composition: whether adult basic writers, who, as Shaughnessy points out, are usually inexperienced, beginning writers, pass through stages of development similar to those of younger students who are learning to write. The present data suggest that adult beginners such as this study's remedial students have syntactic maturity levels which match those of other college freshmen and are far above those Hunt and O'Donnell found for grade school children. Seemingly, disadvantaged, very inexperienced adult writers have language skills which even above average children lack.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND TEACHING

Further research must be done to determine how much sentence combining activity should be included in remedial curricula. The effectiveness of combining exercises has most often been measured by the degree to which they increased mean lengths of students' T units and clauses. In order to have their writing be indistinguishable from that done by 101 writers, however, our remedial students did not need to expand clauses or T units; whether sentence combining can increase remedial students' syntactic maturity to the levels of those scoring over 500 on the SATV has yet to be investigated.

Sentence combining has been reported to improve holistically judged quality of writing [Combs, (1976); Morenberg, Daiker, and Kerek, (1978)]. Researchers could profitably continue the investigations of Waterfall (1978) who found that sentence combining practice did not increase remedial writers' T and clause lengths, but that it did improve the quality ratings of these students' papers.

Different programs for basic writers at various levels of development are needed. For students at the level of this study's 098 writers, work on spelling and verb and noun inflections does seem necessary for those who want to master standard English. However, revisions of placement procedures which heavily penalize dialect features also seem called for.

Much research remains to be done in defining differences between remedial and non-remedial writers, especially those at the level of this study's 099 and 101 students. Investigators might want to look at differences in errors other than the ones dealt with in this experiment; however, the errors that were examined here accounted for so little difference between the three groups that, most probably, research in other areas would be more fruitful. The present researchers suspect that the primary characteristic which separates remedial from non-remedial writers is what Gebbard (1978) proposed as a difference between her "good" and "poor" traditional freshmen writers: a difference in grasp of or sensitivity to nuances of the dialect of written English. Gebbard's conclusions about the importance of fluency, which are supported by the present study, led her to suggest that encouraging confidence in using written language should be any compositions program's first priority. With this idea, the present researchers certainly agree. Remedial writers, even more than traditional freshmen, are hampered by lack of confidence in their ability to put words on papers. The brevity of this study's

098 and 099 papers attest to the paralysis into which academic writing situations can force beginning writers. Excessive emphasis on error correction before any fluency is attained surely compounds beginning writers' hesitancy in committing themselves to paper; practice using written language in a supportive atmosphere would seem to be the exercise most useful in helping remedial students write as fluently and as well as non-remedial freshmen.

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Table 1
Fluency and Measures
of Syntactic Maturity

	098	099	101	F
Number of words	172.01	213.32	278.59	15.12****
T-Length	17.88	16.93	16.94	.33
Clause-Length	9.59	9.71	9.11	.29
Clauses per T	1.97	1.77	1.90	2.30

**** $p < .0001$

Table 2
Spelling Errors Per 50 Words Written

	098	099	101	F
Total	.55	.30	.30	4.62**
Type				
1 (long vowel sound)	0	0	0	0
2 (short vowel sound)	.02	.03	.03	.03
3 (final consonant or consonant cluster)	.03	.03	.02	.20
4 (diacritic e)	.04	.02	.01	2.55
5 (homophone)	.02	.01	.01	.60
6 (suffix)	.09	.01	.03	5.04**
7 (prefix)	0	0	.002	.52
8 (inappropriately doubled consonant)	.01	.02	.02	.39
9 (missing letter or syllable)	.10	.05	.07	1.12
10 (word confusion)	.12	.05	.04	2.87
11 (letter reversal)	.05	.03	.02	1.09
12 (inappropriately added letters)	.01	.04	.03	.70
13 (inappropriately added syllables)	0	0	0	0
14 (lack of consonant doubling)	.03	.01	.01	.33
15 (combinations of error types)	.02	.01	0	2.03
16 (other errors)	.02	0	0	1.45
5 + 10 (homophones and word confusions)	.14	.06	.05	3.50*

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 3

Sentence Faults Per 50 Words Written

	098	099	101	F
Comma splices per 50 words	.06	.05	.03	.59
Fused Sentences per 50 words	.02	.01	.004	.79
Fragments per 50 words	.10	.10	.07	.54

Table 4
Inflection Errors Per 50 Words Written

Past Tense Inflection Errors	098	099	101	F
Type A (inappropriate omission of past tense inflection)	.07	.01	0	4.78**
Type B (inappropriate addition of past tense inflection)	.01	.01	0	2.09

** $p < .01$

Table 4 (Continued)

<u>S</u> Inflection Errors Per 50 Words	098	099	101	F
Type 1 (lack of <u>s</u> inflection for present tense verbs having third person singular subjects)	.07	.01	.002	5.30**
Type 2 (inappropriate addition of <u>s</u> inflection for present tense verbs having non-third person singular subjects)	.03	.003	.003	4.53**
Type 3 (lack of <u>s</u> to mark plural nouns)	.02	0	0	4.12*
Type 4 (lack of <u>s</u> inflection to show possession)	.01	.02	0	1.74

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 5
Syntactic Levels for Subjects Having
SATV Scores Above 500 or Below 300

	SATV - 300	SATV + 500	F
Mean number of words written	180.24	264.92	17.55****
Mean words per T	15.40	18.16	6.32**
Mean words per clause	8.67	9.59	3.40
Mean clauses per T	1.8	1.9	1.01

**** $p < .0001$

** $p < .01$